

U.S. Special Operations - Personal Opinions

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Camp Mackall, NC, 11 December 2008

Vice Admiral James Stockdale, a Medal of Honor recipient and H. Ross Perot's Vice Presidential running mate in 1992, opened his first and only televised appearance with these words: "Who am I? Why am I here?" His audience never did figure that out, but I'm gonna tell you right up front who I REALLY am and why I'm here.

My Credentials

I'm a paper-pusher with no decorations for valor. I'm an honorary member of Special Forces Chapter XIII in Korea, but remain a wannabe who never wore a green beret and briefly served with only one Special Ops outfit more than 40 years ago. That makes me feel like Elizabeth Taylor's eighth husband on their wedding night: I know what I'm supposed to do, but I'm not sure how to make it interesting, because my knowledge about SOF is almost all second hand.

Even so, I take comfort from long-standing close contact with a slew of icons like Bill Yarborough, who convinced President Kennedy that Army Special Forces possessed the capabilities he needed to combat Communist insurgencies; Sam Wilson, who helped convince Congress that it should create a U.S. Special Operations Command; and Barbwire Bob Kingston, who helped convince top-level decision-makers that Delta Force could provide the USA with much needed counterterrorism capabilities. Those great men all called me John and I called them by their first name, which is General.

My Past Contributions

Given their guidance and endless hours probing masterpieces by Special Ops groundbreakers like Mao Zedung, David Galula, and Sir Robert Thompson, I produced four surveys that publicized Special Operations Forces (SOF) favorably on Capitol Hill and beyond, when virtually every command, control, planning, and force posture problem reflected misunderstandings. Few members of Congress or flag officers in any U.S. military service fully appreciated Special Ops capabilities, limitations, and relationships with the rest of this great Nation's national security apparatus. Scores of military and civilian authorities enlightened me during individual and roundtable discussions, then savaged each draft before publication.

First came an April 1987 House Armed Services committee print entitled *U.S. and Soviet Special Operations*, which reappeared commercially as *Green Berets, SEALs, and Spetsnaz*. Several heavy hitters, including former CIA Director Bill Colby, expressed approval on the back cover. I'll never tell anybody how much I paid 'em.

Three years later that same committee published 60 low-intensity conflict case summaries that identified causes of success and failure during the Twentieth Century. That compilation soon resurfaced as *America's Small Wars: Lessons for the Future*.

Correspondence on 30 March 1993 from me to General Carl Stiner, USSOCOM's second commander, said, "I would like to prepare a 'no bullshit' unclassified report for Congress, not just another 'gosh, gee whiz' summation." He cooperated. So did JCS Chairman General Colin Powell, who opened doors that Stiner could not. National Defense University Press distributed the results entitled *Special Operations Forces: An Assessment*.

Finally, I traced SOF ups and down since 1670, when Captain Benjamin Church, the original Ranger, began trailblazing during King Philip's War - - I was still a schoolboy during those days and the United States of America wasn't even a dream, My five chapters, which followed Pete Schoomaker's Overview, consumed half of *U.S. Special Operations Forces*, a giant coffee table book that has made a grand doorstep since 2003.

Personal Opinions

The world little noted nor long remembered any of those potboilers, most of which are long out of print, so my mission this morning is to cherry pick and update bits that you might find particularly useful regarding SOF Truths, mission priorities, Special Ops responsibilities compared with those of CIA, strategic shortcomings that make your job more difficult than it should be, and finally identify ways to reinforce SOF strengths and reduce SOF weaknesses.

Humor me. Take notes. Act like you really believe that what I'm about to say is important.

SOF Truths

Many true believers throughout USSOCOM have memorized SOF Truths, here are the first four of five bullets that I conceived and Congressman Earl Hutto signed in the Foreword to *U.S. and Soviet Special Operations* on 28 April 1987:

- Humans are more important than hardware
- Their quality is more important than quantities
- Special Operations Forces cannot be mass-produced
- Competent SOF cannot be created after emergencies occur

When General Stiner sent me on a Cook's tour of his subordinate commands in 1993 the first stop was Fort Bragg, where USASOC commander Lieutenant General Wayne Downing proudly

concluded his formal presentation with a slide that displayed SOF Truths. He did a double take when I told him “they’re wonderful,” then said, “I wrote ‘em.”

If asked to start over from scratch, I would add one word to the fourth bullet so it would read “Competent SOF cannot be created RAPIDLY after emergencies occur.” Otherwise, I believe they are still solid as bricks, but wish that whoever enshrined the first four had retained Number 5, which says “Most Special Operations require non-SOF assistance.” That oversight was a serious mistake in my opinion, because its omission encourages unrealistic expectations by poorly tutored employers and perpetuates a counterproductive “us versus everybody else” attitude by excessively gung ho members of the SOF community.

Mission Priorities

Few national security policy-makers in the White House, Pentagon, and on Capitol Hill have ever heard of four SOF Truths, much less all five. Those potentates nevertheless determine which Special Ops missions take precedence at given times and places and thereby influence what you and your colleagues here, there, and everywhere do every day.

Congressional legislation in 1986 identified 10 primary SOF responsibilities: direct action, strategic reconnaissance, unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, counterterrorism, civil affairs, psychological operations, humanitarian assistance, theater search and rescue, and “such other activities as may be specified by the President or the Secretary of Defense,” a catch-all category that pertains primarily to the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC).

The top dog at MacDill almost immediately altered several of those duties. STRATEGIC reconnaissance became SPECIAL recon. THEATER search and rescue became COMBAT search and rescue. A slew of collateral functions that feature counter-proliferation, counternarcotics, disaster relief, peacekeeping, security assistance, personnel recovery, and coalition warfare soon appeared.

USSOCOM put counter-proliferation in the primary category more than a decade ago. I wrote a related Congressional Research Service report after reading Dan Kurzman’s *Blood and Water* book about a raid that successfully sabotaged Hitler’s heavy water plant at Vermork, Norway during World War II. My treatise first discussed standoff and on-site intelligence collection followed by Options A through F, which addressed blockades, actions to kidnap key technicians, soft kills, confiscation of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, destruction of NBC facilities, and destruction of delivery vehicles. The wrap-up read this way: All SOF counter-proliferation options are risk-laden and unattractive (some may be infeasible), but inaction could prove worse if enemies use weapons of mass disruption or destruction against crucially important targets. Critics then would clamor, “Why didn’t U.S. leaders take steps to prevent a catastrophe?”

Putting the foregoing list of primary and collateral responsibilities in proper priority is a tough task, because requirements tend to flip flop like fish out of water.

Unconventional warfare, commonly called UW, took precedence during World War II, when OSS teams assisted resistance movements in Nazi-occupied France. Detachment 101's Kachin tribesmen never lost a battle in northern Burma. Donald Blackburn, Russell Volckman, and Wendell Fertig recruited, trained, and led guerrilla bands that gave Japanese invaders fits in the Philippines for more than four years.

Direct action (DA) was a big deal during the Korean War - - my buddy Bob Kingston, who ran waterborne raids on the east coast during his second tour, demolished an entire enemy train in a tunnel one moonless night.

The U.S. Army's SOF centerpiece at Fort Bragg changed missions several times during the Cold War. The Psychological Warfare Center that opened shop in 1952 almost immediately embraced Aaron Banks' 10th Special Forces Group dedicated to UW. It became the U.S. Army Special Warfare Center and School in 1956, then the JFK Center and School after several redirections and redesignations.

Brigadier General Bill Yarborough soon thereafter popularized counterinsurgency, currently called foreign internal defense. President John Fitzgerald Kennedy bought that concept lock, stock, and barrel at a Fort Bragg formation on 12 October 1961. When Yarborough apologized because his FID-trained troops weren't authorized to wear green berets, JFK said, "They are now."

UW prevailed when I belonged to the Joint Unconventional Warfare Task Force in Paris. Its main mission in the mid-1960s must have been conceived in La La Land, because plans called for Special Operations Forces to sponsor resistance groups behind the Iron Curtain, where snitches faithful to the Kremlin infested every layer of Warsaw Pact society from top to bottom. Prospects of success approximated zero.

Army Special Forces, Civil Affairs, and PSYOP units in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Philippines currently concentrate on foreign internal defense, whereas Delta Force, Rangers, most SEAL teams, and the Special Ops Aviation Regiment consistently emphasize direct action.

Direct action in fact has prospered since 1986, because every USSOCOM commander thus far has climbed the DA ladder, mostly within the Joint Special Operations Command. No Army Special Forces officer has ever occupied that slot. Morale problems prevailed throughout the SOF community a decade or so ago, given complaints that JSOC's Special Mission Units enjoyed promotion opportunities, budgetary allocations, flying hours, ammunition allowances, joint training time, and other favors far superior to those that other SOF receive. Such complaints have been muted since 9/11, but reportedly bubble beneath the surface.

I've been invited to view a hostage rescue operation after supper tonight. Army Special Forces troops are well trained and equipped in such regards, but I wonder why any commander would waste area oriented, foreign language qualified, high cost, low density UW and FID specialists on direct action missions except in emergencies.

Sooooo, what's my recommendation to SOF schoolteachers regarding missions, given my belief that planning on certainty is the worst of all military mistakes? Concentrate on responsibilities that currently are in demand, but maintain respectable competence in all others so you don't have to reinvent the wheel when priorities shift unexpectedly, as they've repeatedly done in the past.

SOF-CIA Responsibilities

How should Special Operators and CIA's paramilitary forces share responsibilities that interlock and overlap, given respective strengths and weaknesses are distinctively different? The correct answer depends on who can best accomplish imperative tasks at particular times and places with the greatest chances of cost-effective success and the least likelihood of embarrassing failures.

The Agency in 1947 absorbed UW and direct action functions that the OSS previously exercised. Simple command arrangements, coupled with streamlined logistics and flexible funding, facilitate small, politically sensitive, covert activities that leave few visible footprints. DoD's Special Ops Forces in sharp contrast are far more numerous and versatile. Geneva Conventions give nominal legal protection to them, but not to CIA's civilians.

Delta Force, Rangers, SEALs, Marine SOF, and the Special Ops Aviation Regiment are best suited for armed combat. Army Special Forces are best reserved for unconventional warfare and foreign internal defense missions, in collaboration with Civil Affairs and PSYOP units wherever and whenever appropriate. CIA's primary roles, as I see it, most often should be to help develop strategic and tactical courses of action, expedite approval, cultivate indigenous contacts, supply James Bond-style items on short notice, furnish funds from its ample coffers, and otherwise support specific operations.

Two prominent exceptions come to mind. CIA should answer calls for surgically-precise strikes against high-value, time-sensitive targets whenever its assets can fill the bill most rapidly and effectively. Its agents also should conduct most clandestine missions, which would enable SOF to wear "white hats" and maintain credibility in foreign lands where the Agency has long had an unsavory reputation. Straight-forward propaganda generally should be the province of SOCOM's PSYOPers, leaving CIA's sophisticated spooks to spout disinformation.

CIA and SOF have collaborated closely many times - - Laos, Vietnam, and the 2001 campaign in Afghanistan immediately come to mind - - but institutional jealousies and cumbersome command relationships often impair team play. Resultant temptations to "go it alone" are especially strong at Langley. Urgent needs accordingly exist for "fusion centers" that maximize flexibility, minimize turf battles, break down cultural barriers, facilitate shared intelligence, emphasize mutually agreeable objectives, and thereby expedite the proper implementation of crucial plans.

Exchange programs that involve top policy-making posts, which once were common but now are scarce, could solve many problems before they become serious. Present and projected field operations would benefit immensely from limited-purpose, short-duration SOF tours with CIA and vice versa, a practice that constipated regulations currently impede. Schooling that

introduces key personnel in each organization to the other's institutional customs would also be beneficial.

Strategic Shortcomings

Focus now on strategic shortcomings that impair Special Ops. The composite U.S. scorecard with regard to low-intensity conflicts was spotty during the 20th Century, mainly for political and economic rather than military reasons, because decision-makers at levels far above your pay grade and mine too often mismatched ends with ways and means.

That unfortunate trend continues. We've been at war in Iraq since March 2003, but campaigns still teeter back and forth after almost six frustrating years, because desired end states keep changing. The original U.S. objective, quickly achieved, was to unseat Saddam Hussein. Political, economic, religious, social, and personal power struggles ever since then have defeated intents to replace his totalitarian regime with a Jeffersonian democracy. Whether results of the recent surge to restore internal stability will prove permanent or perishable is uncertain, but withdrawal with honor seems to be the main goal at this moment.

Similar trends have been evident in Afghanistan since autumn 2001, when SOF and CIA's paramilitary forces squelched Taliban troops. Seven years later U.S. grand strategists are still trying to determine what end state is most desirable in that war-weary country. First it was to sanitize terrorist training areas and launch pads. Then it was to build a viable nation where none ever existed before. President-elect Obama says he'll dig in rather than drop out, but my best advice is stay tuned, because political, economic, and military trends at home and abroad may make him change his mind after he occupies the Oval Office on 20 January 2009.

Shortcuts to Superior Performance

When superiors don't know what to do it's hard for subordinates to know how to do it, but they must do the best they can with the hands they're dealt. The key question currently is: How could U.S. Special Operations Forces improve already impressive performance during the ongoing global war against ruthless, unorthodox foes whose innovative strategies and tactics morph at mind-boggling speed?

Autocratic restrictions, built-in biases, compartmentalization, enforced compromise, and security classifications have made it difficult for the Great Man at MacDill to generate and sustain chain reactions of creative thought since 1986, when USSOCOM stood up.

I presented my solution to General Wayne Downing 15 years ago with correspondence that said, "A picture on the wall of my office shows David standing over Goliath. The caption reads 'Who Thinks Wins.' Your headquarters and component commands need all the help they can get to thrive during these trying times, because the best staff you could possibly assemble would contain only a tiny fraction of the talent that is potentially available. Experienced SOF officers and NCOs the world over are eager to furnish you a wide range of options on every subject that concerns your command, but find no convenient way to do so.

“We discussed a clearinghouse for new ideas when you were a brand new brigadier general. Now that you are CINCSOC, I offer to show your staff how to put concepts into practice. You have a lot to gain and nothing to lose, since you alone would determine which ideas to adopt and which to discard.”

Downing decided to give it a try, but his clearinghouse never amounted to much, primarily because the absence of a global email net severely restricted outreach. Your boss at Fort Bragg, in sharp contrast, could establish instantaneous contact with every computer savvy Army Special Forces trooper, active and reserve, regardless of rank or location. No-holds-barred brainstorming admittedly would produce a lot of junk, but hit enough jackpots to make the process pay off. I know, because that’s the way my national security email forum called the Warlord Loop works.

Final Reminder

End of sermon. You now can relax and stop taking notes, because I’ve already told you more than I know about Special Ops, except for a one final reminder.

Your mission today and for an unknown number of tomorrows is to expand Army Special Forces without sacrificing quality, bearing always in mind that competent SOF REALLY CAN’T be mass-produced and REALLY CAN’T be created rapidly after emergencies occur. Balladeer Barry Sadler got it right when he penned these praiseworthy words: “One hundred men we’ll test today, but only three win the Green Beret.” Good luck. God bless. Geriatric John Collins is cheering from the sidelines and salutes all of you.

John M. Collins began to amass military experience when he enlisted in the Army as a private in 1942. Thirty years and three wars later, in 1972, he retired as a colonel. He spent the next quarter century as the leading analyst on military and defense issues at the Congressional Research Service.

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